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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7297
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0996
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4548
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8087
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5648
RHJMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3571
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1411
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000195

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BM

SUBJECT: THAN SHWE,S REFERENDUM: HEADS I WIN, TAILS YOU LOSE

REF: RANGOON 145

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Detained monk U Gambira told family members he hopes the Burmese people will reject the regime's draft constitution and asked them to spread the word. The NLD's Central Executive Committee continued to support a "no" vote, but had not yet developed a strategy or released a statement on its position. Some senior ethnic political figures and activists told us they supported a boycott of the referendum but acknowledged they have not consulted with other opposition groups or carefully considered their strategy or position. Despite the lack of direction from NLD leadership, several NLD youth have devised a plan to advocate for a "no" vote, and 88 Generation Students continued to implement its "vote no" campaign.

U GAMBIRA

¶2. (C) Detained activist monk U Gambira has asked his sister to call on the public to oppose the referendum by voting "no." The detained monk relayed his sentiments to his sister during a March 10 visit in Insein prison. Ma Khin Thu Htay told us her brother stressed the need for the people to be brave and unified in their opposition to the regime's roadmap. The effect of one "yes" vote may be small, he said, but the cumulative effect of many "yes" votes would be disastrous. Ma Khin Thu Htay planned to spread her brother's thoughts by word of mouth and would relay his sentiments to the exile media when they contact her. Beyond that, however, she said neither she nor her family had developed any plans for a broad-based "vote no" campaign. Both U Gambira and his brother, Ko Aung Kyaw Kyaw, remained in Insein prison. Their next court appearance is scheduled to take place on March 17.

NLD

¶3. (C) NLD spokesman U Nyan Win recently told us the

party's Central Executive Committee (the Uncles) remained supportive of a "no" vote, but have not yet released a statement or developed any plan to campaign against the regime's draft constitution. He expected the party would release a statement about the referendum and its plans shortly. In a March 3 meeting with Poloff and the visiting EAP/MLS Director, NLD Central Executive Committee member U Lwin said that the NLD's leadership favored a "no" vote, but could not provide any details on plans to campaign against the constitution. "People will know what to do" he said, without elaborating. However, in a separate meeting with Poloff recently, several NLD youth members from around the country said they had not yet received any instructions from NLD leadership and thought the best course of action was to boycott. The seven NLD activists from Rangoon, Mandalay, Rakhine, Shan, and Karen states described the referendum as an illegitimate process and believed participation might only legitimize the regime's power. But when Poloff relayed the fact that many in the opposition, including their own party, supported participation and a "no" vote, they expressed surprise and said they would try to consult with others and reconsider their position.

¶4. (C) Other NLD youth activists, however, strongly support a "no" vote and are actively developing their own strategies to campaign against the regime's constitution. On March 11, Aye Tun, a leading NLD youth activist and four-time political prisoner, told P/E Assistant that a group of 30 NLD youth have devised a plan to campaign against the regime's constitution. He said he first discussed the plan with NLD Chairman Aung Shwe shortly after the regime announced its plans in February, but only recently got approval to proceed.

The activists plan to spread three simple messages by word

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of mouth: register to vote, participate in the referendum, and vote "no." Our contact said these activists will spend the remaining time before the referendum traveling the country and speaking to as many people as they can in teashops, cinemas, and other public places. Each of the 30 activists will be charged with speaking to as many citizens as possible and encouraging them to spread the word to others. They intend to inform people of their right to register to vote and to explain how and where to do so. They will also stress the need for everyone to get out of their house and participate on referendum day.

¶5. (C) Aye Tun was concerned, however, that campaigning for a "no" vote would be difficult. He believed many people were waiting for a message from the NLD as to whether to participate and how to vote. The party would likely not tell people how to vote though, for fear of prosecution for interfering with the referendum. Likewise, he and his colleagues were afraid they could be arrested if they openly advocated rejecting the regime's proposed charter. Instead, he hoped the Uncles would issue a statement calling on NLD members to reject the constitution, which his activists could then use to persuade others to do the same. Beyond that, he told us his colleagues would say and do whatever they felt comfortable with to convince people to vote "no." While not high-tech or sophisticated, Aye Tun pointed out that a similar word-of-mouth campaign resulted in an overwhelming victory for the NLD in 1990, despite the conventional wisdom the party would only get 50 percent of the vote.

88GS

¶6. (C) 88 Generation Students (88GS) leader Toe Kyaw Hlaing told Polecon Chief he and his colleagues were planning another trip around the country to promote his "vote no" campaign as described in reftel. He has already printed numerous "vote no" t-shirts and stickers and would bring with him written materials to educate citizens on the regime's roadmap and their rights in the referendum.

ETHNICS

17. (C) On March 5, four senior ethnic leaders and members of the Committee Representing the Peoples' Parliament told Poloff and the EAP/MLS Director they supported a boycott but acknowledged they had not consulted with other opposition leaders about the referendum and said their views may not represent those of many ethnic citizens. Mon National Democratic Front Chairman Naing Htun Thein, Zomi National Congress Chairman Pu Chin Sian Thang, Arakan League for Democracy Joint Secretary Aye Thar Aung, and United Nationalities League for Democracy presidium member Htaung Kho Htang all expressed their hope that a boycott might cause the regime to abandon the referendum. However, when pressed, they acknowledged they did not have a plan to organize a widespread boycott and had no idea if any boycott would be successful. None of them had consulted with the NLD, 88GS or other opposition groups, and few had been able to travel to their home states to discuss the referendum with their fellow citizens. Naing Htun Thein added that even when he did have the chance to return to Mon State, most of his fellow activists would not meet with him out of fear of the authorities. In the end, however, all four men told us they had no faith in the referendum and believed the regime would end up coming out ahead, no matter what the result. Htaung Kho Htang likened the referendum to a coin toss, with a twist: "the only way for the people to win is for the coin to land on its edge."

COMMENT

18. (C) By proffering a sham constitution and focusing attention on the mechanics of the referendum, the regime has placed itself in an enviable position: no matter what the result, they win. While the opposition struggles with

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limited resources, poor coordination, and a lack of vision, Than Shwe's regime appears determined to ensure approval of its sham constitution. The military thought they had guaranteed victory in 1990, but lost badly. The public does not have any more confidence in the military now, but most of the best leaders and organizers are now in prison.

VILLAROSA